

A VINDICATION OF THE REV. MR. HECKEWELDER'S\*  
HISTORY OF THE INDIAN NATIONS.

BY WILLIAM RAWLE.

*[Read at a Meeting of the Council, on the 15th day of February, 1826.]*

WHEN a literary work has been in possession of public confidence for years; when the author is known to have been a man of probity incapable of wilful deception; when he is known to have had the best means of information concerning the facts he relates, and when these facts are of a character not too abstruse or profound for the compass of his mind, it is natural for those who have believed and relied on his narration, to feel an interest in supporting the reputation of the author against unexpected and unfounded attacks.

In the year 1819, under the auspices of the Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society, appeared a work entitled "An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations who once inhabited Pennsylvania and the neighboring States, by the Rev. John Heckewelder, of Bethlehem."

Mr. Heckewelder was of German descent. He was a faithful and zealous member of the Moravian Brotherhood at Bethlehem, in this State; and under their

---

\* A Life of John Heckewelder, by the Rev. Edward Rondthaler, edited by B. H. Coates, M.D., was published in 1847.—EDITOR.

direction, he exposed himself for the greatest part of his life to the hardships and the perils of a residence among the Lenapi or Delaware Indians, in an unremitted endeavor to convert them to Christianity.

He was well known in Philadelphia, which, after his age and infirmities, combined with other circumstances, compelled him to relinquish the mission, he occasionally visited. With Doctor Wistar, who was also of German extraction, he was particularly intimate; but he was known to almost all the men of letters in our city, and respected by them all. In his demeanor, he was modest and unassuming. From his long residence among the Indians, he seemed to have imbibed something of their manners: courteous and easy in his intercourse with every one, a stranger to all affectation and artificial ceremony, somewhat inclined to taciturnity, or at least never obtruding himself on the notice of others, or seeking to lead the conversation, those who personally knew him were the more inclined to give credit to his book; and those who read his book before they personally knew him, found that the man corresponded with the character of which the book gave them the idea.

The work was received with general approbation. It was evidently written to support no party, to explain no peculiar system, to promote no personal views: he had formed the narrative for his own private amusement or use, and his consent to appear as an author, both of this and of a subsequent publication, was not given without reluctance.

He presented to us some new views of the Indian

character. He impressed us with the belief that these people were still more acute, more politic, and, in some respects, more refined, than had been generally understood.

But the whole account of them was conveyed in a manner so plain and unaffected, with such evident candor and apparent accuracy, that conviction generally if not universally followed perusal. To enumerate all those persons on whom this impression was made would be tedious. It would not, perhaps, be deemed fair to mention names, however respectable, from whom only colloquial testimony has been received; but when we find in print such authorities as Wistar, Duponceau, and Dr. Jarvis, of New York, all of one sentiment in regard to it, we may justly consider him as proudly supported. To these we add the *North American Review*, the anonymous authors of which, as those of all similar works, stand before the public on the ground of their own strength of mind, soundness of judgment, and purity of taste. Undertaking to instruct the world as to the reception which it ought to afford to the labors of others, they are, as they ought to be, cautious in bestowing commendation, and a work highly extolled must be understood to have been thoroughly examined and fully approved.

The encomiastic strains employed by these gentlemen on the work in question, were not beyond its merits, but they were certainly warm.

After giving an analysis and various extracts, the Reviewers proceeded as follows:

“The work abounds in facts and anecdotes calculated,

not merely to entertain the reader, but to lay open, in the most *authentic* and *satisfactory* manner, the character and condition of this people. There is no *other work extant*, in which this design has been so *extensively adopted*, or in which the object is so *fully accomplished*."

With these testimonials, the work of Heckewelder has glided down the historical current of time without any impeachment of its merits, till its author has been removed to a world from which he can wield no weapon of defence against sublunary criticism.

Were he still living, he would read with surprise the altered language of the same literary dictators, the same guides and directors of our taste and judgment, our approbation or rejection.

The unqualified condemnation, in 1826, of a work so highly extolled in 1819, would be productive of little other injury than that which the authors of the Review would sustain by the diminution of their own authority from the exhibition of their own inconsistency; but multitudes will read the Review of the present year to whom that of 1819 is, and perhaps ever will be, unknown. The American public will, perhaps, be considered by them as the credulous subjects of gross imposition, and perhaps the name of John Heckewelder be ranged with that of John D. Hunter.

It will not, therefore, be improper in one who knew and esteemed Mr. Heckewelder when living, and with unabated confidence still highly values his work, to take a short view of the late attempt to strip him of his fame.

In the *North American Review* for January last is a long and labored article, under the general head of "Indians of North America," and the two works, the titles of which are, in the usual manner, prefixed, are Hunter's book, published here about two years ago, and a recent composition of a Mr. Halkett, in London. On the latter, very little attention is bestowed: Hunter's imposition is exposed, as it seems to deserve. But Mr. Heckewelder's work, although the reader is not led, from the title of the article, to expect it will be noticed at all, forms the chief subject of much positive contradiction and much severe animadversion, although, at the same time, the Reviewers refer, without explanation or apology, to their own laudatory notices in 1819.

Heckewelder is now represented as a man of "moderate intellect, and still more moderate attainments." We are told that his knowledge of the Indian character was wholly derived from the Delawares; that their legendary stories were received by him in perfect good faith, and "recorded with all the gravity of history."

"His *naïveté*" is said to be "truly amusing; yet, with much valuable information, no work that has appeared for half a century, has produced more erroneous impressions on this subject. He looks back to a sort of golden age of the Delawares. It may have been so, but there is not the slightest reason to believe it.

"Many of his assertions and conclusions are utterly irreconcilable with the most authentic accounts and with well-known circumstances. His history, if true, would unhinge all our knowledge on these subjects, and destroy

all our confidence in the early French writers, who wrote under favorable circumstances for observation."

This is but a part of the remarks which are made in the usual positive manner of Reviewers, exercising their supposed unlimited sovereignty over what we sometimes affect to call the republic of letters.

It is obvious that if this is the genuine character of Mr. Heckewelder's work, we have been greatly imposed on; and if all our knowledge is "unhinged" by his faulty productions, the world cannot be too soon informed of its error. But general assertions will not always produce conviction,—and we naturally expect that specific examples, supported by reasonable proof, shall be adduced, before we withdraw our reliance on a work which has so long been received as credible and authentic.

It is indeed the more necessary when the opponent himself falls into a looseness of expression which is nowhere exceeded by him whom he condemns, and when he weakens or destroys his own argument by the illustration with which he endeavors to support it. Thus, in the last paragraph quoted, the Reviewers at first generalize, then connect their observation with a particular case, and afterwards show that this illustration of it is of no value.

We had previously been told, in the same article, that an actual residence among the Indians was the only means of obtaining a competent knowledge of their character. Mr. Heckewelder's long residence among them is distinctly noticed, and of course he had the power of obtaining a more perfect knowledge of them than could

be acquired by casual travellers. If their accounts differ from his, there is therefore no reason for giving the preference to them; and the Reviewers seem particularly injudicious in proceeding to mention the name of *La Hontan*, whom, at the same time, they described as unworthy of credit, and of course as rendering it no loss to us if his "fables" should be superseded by the plain narrative of Heckewelder. In another place, they condemn the early and principal French writers in a mass, excepting only *Charlevoix*. We are told that they were "credulous men, who possessed neither enlarged views nor sound judgment."

The Reviewers proceed to consider some of the most "prominent errors" of our venerable author; and they deserve our thanks for enabling us thus to examine those imputations which, while wrapped up in general terms, it would not be in our power to understand or refute.

In the consideration of them, the order in which they are presented will, as much as possible, be adhered to, although their relative importance might require a different arrangement. In the first place, an objection is raised against the orthography; and in the next place, against the translation of the ancient national appellation of the Delawares. Mr. Heckewelder has erred in writing *Lenni Lenapi*: it should be *Lennee Lenaupè*, accentuating the last syllable with a strong expiration of the breath, which has no exact representative in the English alphabet. If this latter is the case, it is not very reasonable to condemn a man for not doing what is impossible. In respect to the mode of spelling these two words, Mr. Heckewelder

has much authority on his side; but the variation is too minute to form a proper subject of reprehension.

The translation of these words is more interesting. That given by Mr. Heckewelder corresponds with the lofty notions entertained by the savage of the source from which he sprung. *Lenni*, he tells us, signifies *man*, and *lenapi* means *original*; but the Reviewers inform us that the more general and proper sense of "lennee" is *male*, although in a restricted sense, it may signify *man*, and that "lenaupè" means *common*,—so that, according to them, these words, when used together, import *common male*; according to Mr. Heckewelder, they signify *original man*. On which side the inaccuracy lies, would probably soon be decided by the Delawares themselves, and the subject merits no further notice.\*

3. An objection is next made to Mr. Heckewelder's relation, that the Delawares bore, in respect to other tribes, the designation of grandfathers, supporting in some degree their claim to an ancient and extensive superiority. The Reviewers deny his inference, but, with an air of mystery, observe that a "full consideration of the subject might lead to important conclusions." Mr. Heckewelder speaks with modesty and reserve, and it would be difficult to adopt any other reason for this figurative language than that which he assigns. We are all acquainted with the constant practice of the Indians

---

\* The confusion of ideas on this subject imputed to Mr. Heckewelder, in a note at p. 68, cannot be perceived by the writer of this article on examining the passages referred to, but it would require too much time to go through them.



to apply the epithet "Father," to the President of the United States, as they formerly did to the King of Great Britain; always indicating political superiority by a domestic phrase; and the application of a higher cognate term among themselves, in those early days to which it is traced, may reasonably be supposed to have signified a still higher political relation. The fact itself does not seem to be contradicted by the Reviewers.

4. The account of the ancient Lenapi conquering the Allegewi is, in the next place, objected to; but, whether true or false, Heckewelder, who expressly relates it as a tradition of the Lenapi, is not responsible. And a general remark may here be introduced, that the author who professes to give an account of the history of a nation among whom he has resided, would perform his task imperfectly if he disregarded their own traditions. The ancient history of every part of Europe depends on such traditions, the probable truth of which is sometimes supported by circumstances that are subsequently authenticated. In the Lenapian history of the total extirpation of the Allegewi, we see nothing inconsistent with the well-known ferocity of savage tribes, which still unhappily continues to rage among them.

5. In the trifling discussion on the etymology of the word Mississippi, the Reviewers may be right; and if the Chippewas were really the godfathers of that majestic stream, the conjunction of the terms *mesee* great, and *seepee* river, is more natural than that in which Mr. Heckewelder was instructed by his Delaware friends.

6. The ancient fortifications are attributed by Hecke-

welder to the Allegewi. The Reviewers say no,—the forefathers of the present Indians erected them; and they gravely quote Dr. Clark to show that there were fortifications in Greece. We will venture to remark, that neither Heckewelder nor the Reviewers could know anything about the matter, and one had as good a right to speculate as the other.

7. The “puerile” history of the former power of the Delawares, and the manner in which the sceptre departed from them, is severely ridiculed. Now it is an Indian tradition, and as such it is given by Heckewelder, that the Iroquois, with the assistance of the Dutch, by a great refinement in policy, and with considerable difficulty, persuaded the Delawares to “put on the petticoat and become women;” that is, to lay aside the practice of arms, and, confining themselves to the arts of peace, become the arbiters of the surrounding tribes. To this, it is said, the Iroquois were induced by a fear of the numbers and power of the Delawares; and, while they thus neutralized this formidable nation, the Iroquois were not only free from apprehensions for their own safety, but were left at liberty to pursue their military expeditions against other powers. The Iroquois, on the contrary, contended that they reduced the Delawares to this condition by force of arms; and one thing only is certain, that until a very late period, the Iroquois asserted certain rights over the Delawares, even so far as to restrain them from alienating their lands. Their insolent abuse of this superiority was strongly manifested at the treaty of Philadelphia, in 1742. But Heckewelder is supported in his

account by the Rev. Mr. Loskiel; and he also appears to have conversed with some of the Iroquois on the subject. If the tradition of the Delawares is correct, it is certainly an extraordinary instance of a nation's voluntarily parting with the means of self-defence for the purpose of becoming mediators and arbiters between the other nations. But the loss of military power would have been compensated, as they represented, by their own increase and internal happiness, had it not been for the constant encroachments of the white people. It is now of little consequence. The melancholy and degraded remnants of both the Iroquois and the Delawares, without power or permanence, by referring to the memory of the past, only embitter the present, and vainly seek in traditions a consolation for the absence of almost every substantial happiness.

8. Much severity is employed on the relation given by Heckewelder of a conversation between Colonel Crawford, a prisoner about to be executed, and *Wingenund*, a chief of the Delawares, whom Crawford had sent for, in hopes of obtaining mercy through his intercession. No white man, say the Reviewers, could have been present at this conversation; and therefore the inference is, that it was merely a creature of Heckewelder's imagination: indeed, they say expressly that it is "wholly apocryphal."

Now, if the book were quoted with the least degree of candor, the reader would perceive that Mr. Heckewelder does not pretend to have been present on the occasion, but informs us that the particulars of this conversation were communicated to him by *Wingenund* and others.

If he falsified the relation he received, no terms of reprobation would be too strong; but a gratuitous imputation of so much depravity cannot be approved.

In the disposition to cavil at almost everything related by our author, the Reviewers find fault with another part of this conversation. "Had you attended," says *Wingewund*, "to the Indian principle, that good and evil cannot dwell together in the same heart," &c. This principle is declared by the Reviewers to be new to them. "It would be difficult," they say, "to find it either speculatively or practically in any other place than the Delaware school of ethics." They ought to have recollected that the question is not whether the philosophy was sound, but whether the information given to Heckewelder was truly reported by him.

It seems an indirect attempt to diminish his weight of character, and it does not merit approbation.

9. In the same disposition to condemn, insinuations of at least a want of precision are, in a subsequent passage, thrown out against this worthy man, to support which a part of a sentence is quoted. That an Indian should say, "I am a sort of a chief," is supposed to be impossible; but the residue of the sentence is omitted, in which the Indian observes, that he is neither a great chief nor a very small one. That there are gradations of power and distinction among them, is well known.

10. Another remark of the same Indian is quoted with the same skepticism by the Reviewers. It is the enumeration of articles which a successful hunt would have enabled the Indian to procure for his wife; and, although

they do not constitute the common food of those people, we may reasonably suppose that in the vicinity of missionary settlements such articles were known and acceptable to the females.\* In their concluding objection, the Reviewers are equally unsuccessful, if they mean to impugn the veracity of Heckewelder. They contradict the account given of *Tur-hé*, or the Crane, murdering an Indian of the name of Leatherlips: but Heckewelder does not relate the fact as of his own knowledge; he transcribes a letter by which the account was conveyed to him.

In respect to the philological talents of Mr. Heckewelder, it is not intended at present to enter into any discussion. The writer of these remarks has never felt an inclination to study evanescent forms, or to keep alive a variety of languages, which, from every motive of national and beneficent policy, he would wish to see absorbed in one general tongue. The tribe whose peculiar and extraordinary dialect rivets the attention of the philologist, moulders into nothing before he becomes master of its language; and the vocabulary laboriously collected, and the grammar scientifically derived from it, in a few years remain the only certain evidence of its former existence. Yet the study is in itself one of high interest to those who delight to trace the powers and operations of the mind, and it is not intended to detract in the smallest degree from the ardor

---

\* In Mr. Schoolcraft's journal of his travels, it appears that he and Governor Cass partook of a breakfast at an Indian wigwam, among the articles composing which were *bread* and *tea*.

of their pursuits. On the present occasion, it will only be observed that, in 1819, the Reviewers applauded "the ingenious and useful labors" of Heckewelder in these investigations; and, in 1826, he is styled "negligent and inaccurate." On this subject, Mr. Schoolcraft, whose work is mentioned with approbation by the Reviewers, may also be referred to. His words are, "The inquiries into the Indian languages, under the directions of Mr. Heckewelder, evince more severity of research than had before his time been bestowed upon the subject; but the observations of this pious and worthy missionary have only opened the door of inquiry."

These remarks have, perhaps, been sufficiently extended for the mere purposes of vindication. If it has been shown, that in many instances Heckewelder has been unfairly quoted and unjustly condemned, we are entitled to ask for further evidence of his errors, before we assent to the total rejection of his book from the catalogue of our standard authorities.

But it is not unreasonable to inquire, whether those who have spared another so little, have entitled themselves, by their own consistency and precision, to the exercise of an office so high and so severe. Whoever reads the whole of this part of the Review, cannot fail to perceive in it a constant attempt at original and profound reflection, not always successful; theories that are contradicted or abandoned almost as soon as they are formed, and modes of ratiocination which frequently refute themselves. We are assured by the Reviewers, that we are about as ignorant of the moral character and feelings of

the Indians, as when Jacques Cartier first ascended the St. Lawrence. The confession is commendable, if it were correct; but he who undertakes to assert that the mass of information of which we are possessed is not to be depended on, ought to satisfy us that he has acquired that exact and superior knowledge which can alone enable him thus to pronounce upon the imperfections of ours.

It is positively asserted that the Indians "have no government;" but this is explained by saying that they have none whose operation is felt either in rewards or punishments, and yet the Reviewers add that their lives and property are protected. By what means, unless by some power of government, can this protection be systematically afforded? Their "political relations" among themselves, and with other tribes, are said to be duly preserved. How can they be preserved unless by means of laws, not the less obligatory because not reduced to writing.\*

The submission of an Indian who has been guilty of murder to the retributive stroke of a relation of the deceased is, by an interrogative mode of reasoning, referred to some unknown principle, equally efficacious with the two great motives of hope and fear, "upon which all *other* governments have heretofore rested." Without pausing to consider the meaning of the word "other," which no accurate writer would make use of, unless the Indians also had a government, we may distinctly account

---

\* In page 63 of the Review, we are told that the Indians have *laws* regulating marriage. It would be strange if they had laws on no other subject.

for the course pursued on such occasions by referring to the ancient history of European nations, where similar procedures were established as the regular course of penal law. They prevailed in Greece, in the time of Homer; in Germany, when Tacitus wrote his annals; in England, Wales, and Ireland; and although now generally abolished, it is well known that in England they still continue, in certain cases, under some legal restrictions.

The Indian, therefore, who submits to this mode of vindictive punishment, submits to the laws of his country; and if he neither "flees nor resists," it is because both would be alike disgraceful and unavailing.

But these retaliative criticisms need not to be further pursued, although perhaps some addition to them might fairly be made. The detection of errors in reasoning, or inaccuracies in diction, on the part of the Reviewers, will not redeem the faults of Mr. Heckewelder; yet it is not unpardonable to have shown that those who are so liberal of censure, are not, themselves, free from imperfection. The authority of a sentence is somewhat impaired, when we perceive that the judge partakes of the same delinquency.

The author of these strictures, seeing no reason to alter the opinions of Mr. Heckewelder's merits, which he avowed in the Inaugural Address, has felt it a duty to endeavor to support them; but he hopes that he will not be thought to have evinced more asperity than the occasion justifies. The merit of the *North American Review* is fully admitted. It generally contains much valuable in-



formation and sound remark: it supports our literary reputation abroad, and largely contributes to the dissemination of polite learning at home; but, in the present article, the Reviewers seem, to have forgotten their own habits, and it may also be said, their own established character. The rumor by which it is attributed to a person in office under the United States, may not be unfounded; but, on rumor only, his name could not be introduced without impropriety; and no other course is open to general readers, than to consider the publication as an adoption, by the editors, of all which the article contains.